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SUBJECT: MAINTAINING KOSOVO'S POST-ELECTION MOMENTUM: CREATING AN
ANCHOR FOR SERBS IN KOSOVO

REF: A) PRISTINA 510 AND PREVIOUS B) PRISTINA 357

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED Q PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: November 15 municipal elections in Kosovo saw levels of Serb turnout not seen in years, with Serbs winning the mayor's offices of three new Serb-majority municipalities outright and gaining an opportunity to contest "new" Novo Brdo and Strpce in December runoffs. This turnout presents a rare opportunity to make decentralization -- the key to Serb participation in Kosovo structures -- work. We need to take advantage of it. With this in mind, our short-term strategy will focus on maintaining the momentum as we move towards the December 13 runoffs where successes in new Novo Brdo and/or Strpce would help cement our gains on November 15. Over the longer-term, we must pursue a strategy that: 1) engages with the new municipalities and ensures their success (this may require additional assistance resources); 2) focuses on the two Ahtisaari-mandated Serb-majority municipalities that have yet to hold an election, including North Mitrovica; and, 3) ensures the Kosovo Government makes the policy and financial decisions required to support decentralization. These steps are important, but they are not sufficient. We must do more to counter Belgrade's pressure on the Kosovo Serb community. Finally, we also believe that it is now time to begin challenging the legitimacy of the illegal Serb parallel structures in Kosovo. END SUMMARY

BIG SERB WINS IN MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

12. (SBU) As results are finalized, we are beginning to get a clearer picture of the small revolution that occurred among ethnic Serb voters south of the Ibar River during Kosovo's November 15 municipal elections. Serb mayors were elected outright in the newly-decentralized Serb-majority municipalities of Gracanica/Gracanice, Klokot/Klllokot, and Ranilug/Ranillug, and Serb candidates will take part in December 13 runoff elections for mayor in the newly expanded municipality of Novo Brdo/Noveberde and in majority Kosovo Serb Strpce/Shterpce. Serbs in Strpce have a legitimate chance to elect Bratislav Nikolic of SLS, who won 36.9 percent of the vote in round one, if they turn out in sufficient numbers. Prime Minister Thaci told us on November 18 that his PDK will not run hard in Strpce, but we expect Strpce's Albanian community to stand behind the PDK's candidate.

¶3. (SBU) Significant Serb turnout should also translate into participation in Kosovo's municipal assemblies. Municipal assembly seats are awarded according to a proportional representation system. Apportionment will not be finalized until official results are certified, which should occur sometime in the next few days. Nonetheless, preliminary, uncertified results are positive. Kosovo Serbs should dominate the assemblies in Gracanica and Ranilug. They should also form the single largest blocs in Klokot and Strpce, while the 28 percent of votes cast for Kosovo Serb candidates in Novo Brdo, a municipality thought to be fairly evenly balanced between Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs, should ensure a multi-ethnic municipal assembly coalition.

MAINTAINING MOMENTUM FOR ROUND TWO

¶4. (SBU) The municipal election results provide us with an historic, but limited, opportunity to help Kosovo Serbs, at least those south of the Ibar, to integrate into Kosovo structures. We need to seize it. The first challenge is maintaining the momentum as we head into the December 13 runoffs. The historic Serb turnout on November 15 was, in part, a function of a weeks-long effort by the international community to encourage Serb participation. Serb turnout is even more critical for the second round of balloting in Strpce and Novo Brdo. With this in mind, we will continue to pursue our political, public diplomacy, and assistance strategies aimed at emphasizing the benefits of and the need for local citizens to run their own governments. We will communicate this message through visible project support for majority-Serb municipalities, appearances by the Ambassador at media roundtables with candidates, and interviews with the Ambassador for local media that receive Serb attention.

MAKING THE NEW MUNICIPALITIES GO

¶5. (SBU) Second, we are also starting to look ahead to see how we can ensure that the new ethnic Serb-majority municipalities succeed. We must avoid Serb leaders inheriting empty shells as municipal structures that do not afford them the tools they need to develop thriving, self-governing communities for Kosovo's Serbs. The municipal preparation teams (MPTs) that have been laying the foundation for Gracanica, Klokot, Ranilug, and the expanded Novo Brdo to operate as functioning municipalities will disband at the end of the year. With U.S. assistance, these MPTs have created the organograms for the new municipalities; have ensured that the new municipalities can respond with provisional measures to fulfill devolved responsibilities such as social welfare, health care, and education; and have established mechanisms for basic services such as trash collection and fire protection.

¶6. (SBU) These initial steps have developed a skeletal frame for the new municipalities, but it does not mean that they are ready to stand on their own. While we sense that some of our European partners are ready to declare decentralization a completed success now that elections have taken place, this transition point only marks the start of the hard work to follow. In fact, our engagement with the new municipalities needs to intensify, and as we have suggested previously, our work must focus on four key areas: 1) governance structure; 2) organizational structure; 3) competencies/services; and, 4) facilities and equipment (Ref. B). This may require greater assistance resources from Washington and will necessitate a close examination of our plan for working in the new municipalities. We have one chance to get decentralization right, and we cannot afford to let these new municipalities limp with crippled resources and uncertain direction. They must thrive from day one.

FOCUSING ON PARTESH AND NORTH MITROVICA

¶7. (SBU) Two remaining Ahtisaari-mandated, Serb-majority municipalities have not yet held elections: Partesh and North Mitrovica. Elections are planned to take place in both municipalities in May 2010. There are reasonable prospects for success in Partesh, which is almost 100 percent Serb and located south of the Ibar. Success in North Mitrovica will be much more difficult to achieve. The MPT process alone will not be a sufficiently robust vehicle to promote political participation in

North Mitrovica, and our avenues for constructively engaging Serbs north of the Ibar are limited. However, the success of decentralization in Gracanica, Klokot, Ranilug, and "new" Novo Brdo, and progress in Strpce would demonstrate that decentralization's benefits are real and tangible. Though this does not guarantee success in the north, without it there is little prospect of countering claims from parallel structures and elsewhere that decentralization is a mirage.

GETTING THE KOSOVO GOVERNMENT TO DO ITS PART

17. (SBU) The GOK has primary responsibility for ensuring decentralization's success, and its record has been spotty so far. We have had to push and prod the Ministry for Local Government Administration (MLGA) to appoint MPTs, and the minister, Sadri Ferati, has often been hesitant to proceed without an explicit green light from Prime Minister Thaci. Too often we have seen the GOK try to put decentralization on the back burner. The reasons are many: it is a concept imposed by the international community; Albanians generally oppose carving out land that will reify separate Serb political structures; the PDK is uncomfortable with a process that runs against its preference for centralizing power in its own hands; the mother municipalities often oppose losing territory; and, nationalist organizations like Vetevendosje have caricatured decentralization as an assault on the Albanian nation and Kosovo statehood. GOK inaction, however, is unacceptable, and we will continue to work to ensure that the central government recognizes its responsibility to make decentralization work, both in the new municipalities and through the extension of additional competencies

to all municipalities that is mandated by law.

18. (SBU) We have spoken to Thaci about making some significant gestures and investments in the new municipalities -- for example, a new hospital in Gracanica that will fill a long-standing need and that will fall outside the control of parallel structures -- and we are pushing both the Prime Minister and the President to initiate a public outreach campaign that addresses Serbs as Kosovo citizens and welcomes and respects them as national resources, voters, and neighbors. We must also work with the MLGA and the Ministry of Finance and Economy to guarantee that the new municipalities receive the resources they need to operate. This includes funding that was awarded to the mother municipalities for standing up new municipalities and now risks being returned to the central government without being used. We are telling the GOK that decentralization is an international mandate, but it is Kosovo's responsibility, and we will be watching and judging the GOK's actions.

COUNTERING BELGRADE'S INTERFERENCE

19. (SBU) Pushing the GOK to do the right thing, however, will not yield results unless we can also get Belgrade to ease its pressure on Serbs living in Kosovo. Following the November 15 elections, Serbian Ministry for Kosovo State Secretary Oliver Ivanovic told the media that the Serb turnout in Kosovo's elections had shaken official Belgrade, and he suggested that Belgrade needs to change its engagement with Kosovo Serbs. Serbian Minister for Kosovo Goran Bogdanovic alleged the polls had been manipulated and questioned the likelihood that Kosovo Serbs will ever receive institutional support from Albanians in the GOK. We take these statements to mean that the Government of Serbia (GOS), or recalcitrant elements within it, may renew efforts to promote parallel structures by threatening to cut financial ties and other benefits to Serbs who engage with Kosovo institutions. We will likely need to regularly remind the GOS of Kosovo Serbs' right to engage with Kosovo institutions, without fear of retribution, in order to survive as a community.

RETHINKING TOLERANCE OF PARALLEL STRUCTURES

10. (SBU) As we work on Belgrade, we also need to take advantage of increasing Serb voter participation to take on Serbian parallel government structures in Kosovo. The parallel structures are illegal institutions that perpetuate the myth that Serbia still controls Kosovo and only Serbia can serve Kosovo Serbs' needs. This

is dangerous and keeps Kosovo Serbs in a state of limbo and insecurity. Annex Two of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1244 -- a document that Belgrade uses as a tool to prevent Serb integration in Kosovo -- specifies how Serbian personnel may operate in Kosovo, and there is no role for any kind of Serbian civilian administration. We believe it is time to underscore that the parallel institutions are illegal, and Serbia's continued support for them violates UNSCR 1244. It is the international community's responsibility to lead this charge. We do not want the GOK taking on Serbian parallel personnel and structures -- a certain recipe for major unrest among Kosovo Serbs that would reverse our recent gains -- but we need to start delegitimizing Serbia's claims in Kosovo. It is time to confront Belgrade with its own hypocrisy.

USING SERBIAN MEDIA FOR KOSOVO'S BENEFIT

¶11. (SBU) One tool for confronting Belgrade and for reaching Kosovo's Serbs is the Serbian media, an underutilized resource for local outreach. Serbian media remain the fundamental source of news for Kosovo Serbs, who pay scant attention to Kosovo Albanian and locally produced Serb-language media sources. Responsible coverage in Serbia could help convince Serbs in Kosovo and in Serbia, itself, of the benefits of decentralization and electoral participation. It is critical to get responsible, thoughtful Kosovo Serb leaders and politicians on select Belgrade media. We want to see trusted Kosovo Serb voices arguing for a large audience the case for decentralization and for Serb engagement with Kosovo institutions. Let Kosovo Serbs counter the Serbian government's rhetoric on its

own territory, on its own airwaves. Talented orators, such as newly-elected mayor of Gracanica Bojan Stojanovic (SLS), do not have the resources or contacts to garner national coverage from Serbian media outlets. With Embassy Belgrade's assistance, it may be possible to get a media platform for certain Kosovo Serb politicians, especially with a view to runoff elections in Novo Brdo and Strpce, races that pit Serbs against Albanians.

COMMENT

¶12. (SBU) Initial success in municipal elections has given Kosovo Serb parties a chance to prove themselves. We now need to make sure that these nascent Kosovo Serb leaders and municipal structures succeed. Decentralization's success -- our best hope for significant Serb participation in Kosovo -- hinges on developing these municipalities into thriving, economically viable communities.

Each bit of progress will make it easier to convince more Serbs that there are rewards for operating within Kosovo institutions and cooperating with Albanians. Achieving this progress will require comprehensive cooperation among the international community, the GOK, and the Serb community. It will require resources, assistance, and expertise. Success now means real implementation of the Ahtisaari Plan and anchoring in place the multi-ethnic Kosovo which is the crux of USG policy here. While the specifics of how to deal with northern Kosovo remain cloudy, successful new municipalities south of the Ibar will be an important agent of change there as well. We cannot lose this opportunity, and we need to be able to step up with the investments and the resources required to capitalize on the opportunities that these extremely successful municipal elections afford us.

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